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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000977

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: ARE MODERATE SHIA THE ANSWER TO MARCH  
14'S POLITICAL WOES?

REF: BEIRUT 896

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4  
(b) and (d).

#### SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) Recent discussions with two political figures from opposite sides of the confessional spectrum revealed a common thread in terms of broadening March 14's political alliances -- the need to secure the support of moderate Shia. While one advocated an alliance with Amal as a means for March 14 to secure a candidate of its choice in the upcoming presidential elections, the other viewed broader outreach to Shia not affiliated with either Amal or Hizballah as necessary to ensure March 14's longer-term political viability. Interestingly, neither figure exhibited much trust in his group's traditional political allies. End summary.

CHRISTIANS: AOUN OUT, BERRI IN?

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¶2. (C) Elie Khoury, Political Advisor to Lebanese Forces (LF) leader Samir Geagea, told Pol/Econ Chief June 28 that LF, as a Christian party, would prefer an alliance with General Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) in March 14's efforts to form a national unity government. However, the LF doesn't trust Aoun, who frequently changes course according to the prevailing political winds in his never-ending quest for the presidency. Khoury viewed Aoun's constant maneuvering as short-sighted and, by putting personal ambition before the needs of the country, in part to blame for the Cedar Revolution's loss of momentum. Case in point: Khoury, referring to Aoun's recent statements that a second government would be better than the status quo, said Aoun does not really want a second government, but is evoking it as a scare tactic to provoke March 14 into making more concessions on a national unity government. (Note. Just ten days earlier Aoun had agreed with the Ambassador's assertion that a second government would be "catastrophic" -- reftel. End note.)

¶3. (C) Khoury said LF was therefore considering an alternative strategy whereby it would try to peel Parliament Speaker Nabil Berri's Amal party away from Hizballah to secure enough votes for March 14 to elect a president of its choice. Under Khoury's scenario, March 14 would have 70 seats in parliament (assuming it wins the August 5

by-elections to replace assassinated MPs Pierre Gemayel and Walid Eido, which Khoury was confident it would if the elections go forward as planned). Adding the Amal bloc's 15 votes, March 14/Amal would have a total of 85 votes, just one vote short of the 86 needed to elect a president in the first round of voting, where a two-thirds quorum is required. Khoury believes March 14 can easily get at least one of the less-committed Aounist parliamentarians to jump ship and vote with the majority.

14. (C) Of course, Khoury acknowledged, this strategy hinged on agreement with Amal on the presidency; Nassib Lahoud and Boutros Harb were the most likely candidates, in his view. Khoury was not concerned that the opposition would boycott the presidential vote, citing Berri's repeated claims that he will convene parliament on September 15. Khoury interpreted this to mean Amal will be present and will vote, adding that usually when Berri says he will do something specific like this, he does.

SHIA: BERRI, HIZBALLAH OUT, THIRD-WAY SHIA KEY TO ELECTORAL SUCCESS

14. (C) Independent Shia and former Amal MP Mohamad Baydoun, offered a longer-term prescription for March 14's political troubles. Criticizing Future Movement leader Saad Hariri and PM Fouad Siniora for their naive trust in Berri, Baydoun said the GOL continues to view Amal and Hizballah as partners when it should be treating them as rivals. He argued March 14 should be pursuing a broader policy to woo those Shia who don't support Amal or Hizballah, i.e., those who aren't represented politically by these groups and haven't

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benefitted from their financial assistance following last summer's war.

15. (C) Baydoun feared that, unless March 14 starts today, it faces a very real possibility that Hizballah will take over parliament in the 2009 elections. Moreover, there is an urgency now for immediate outreach to southern Shia who are angry with how the government paid indemnities after last summer's war between Hizballah and Israel. If Hariri were smart, Baydoun said, he'd reach out to these people and make sure they see the government's financial assistance to the south and the Biqa'. These groups could be easily mobilized in favor of the current government. Expanding the Lebanese Armed Forces to integrate many young Shia would also dampen Hizballah's attraction to moderate Shia youth, Baydoun added.

16. (C) In terms of March 14's immediate challenge of electing a president of its choice, Baydoun warned about a Hizballah plan to physically prevent parliament from meeting. According to Baydoun's reading of the constitution, parties can legally boycott parliament during the first month (Sept. 25 - Oct. 25) of the two-month period running up to the expiration of President Lahoud's mandate. However, since they have a constitutional duty to elect a president within the two-month period, they must be present and vote during the second month. Although March 14 does not have enough votes to elect a president the first round of voting (when a two-thirds majority is required), it would win the second vote requiring only a simple majority. Hence Hizballah's plan to block MPs access to the voting sessions.

17. (C) Entirely on his own initiative (and speaking the day before the President's June 29 visa ban proclamation against individuals threatening Lebanon's sovereignty and democracy), Baydoun urged the US to take action targeting the financial assets of those working against the current government. A ban against individuals is not enough, he argued; we need to hit them where it hurts -- in their pocketbooks.

18. (C) Comment. Using Baydoun's reasoning, March 14

(assuming no more of its MPs are assassinated) has no way it can lose the presidency under the constitution. However, each new day in Lebanon seems to bring a new interpretation of the constitution to light. Even if Baydoun's reading is correct, we don't share his faith that opposition MPs wouldn't boycott the elections regardless, despite Khoury's (somewhat optimistic, in our view) assertion that Berri will stick to his word. The opposition is determined to see a candidate of its (Syrian overlords') liking in Baabda Palace; failing that, it will pursue whatever means necessary to prevent the elections from going forward. End comment.

FELTMAN